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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Lebanese-Syrian Track

Key stories in the media:

All media (lead stories in Ha'aretz and Jerusalem Post) reported that last night in Tel Aviv, the Likud Central Committee overwhelmingly approved a resolution urging the party's Knesset members to work for the enactment of legislation to enable a referendum on the disengagement plan. In an aggressive speech -- punctuated by periodic calls of "Sharon, go home!" and "Sharon is a dictator -- PM Sharon made it clear that he intends to pay no more attention to this decision than he has to other party decisions that contravened his plans. Both Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and FM Silvan Shalom spoke in favor of a referendum. At the same time, Netanyahu called on the Likud to support the 2005 state budget, which will determine the future of the government. Jerusalem Post quoted some far-right activists and Gaza settlers as saying that there are groups of settlers who have decided that they would rather commit suicide than evacuate their homes.

Ha'aretz reported that the PA is asking that Israel allow two (four, according to Israel Radio) Islamic Jihad activists whom PA security forces have arrested in Tulkarm in the wake of last week's suicide bombing in Tel Aviv, to be jailed in Jericho. The media reported that Israel has not acceded to the demand. Ha'aretz reported that in contravention of the Sharm el-Sheikh understandings, Israel is chasing the members of the Islamic Jihad in Tulkarm.

Yediot prominently front-paged a picture of a demonstration in Beirut, illustrating the lead story written by its special correspondent Eldad Beck, who underscored the protesters' determination to bring about the pullout of Syria's forces from the country. Israel Radio reported that President Bush will meet with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice today to discuss ways of implementing the Syrian forces' withdrawal from Lebanon.

Ha'aretz reported that Lebanese figures have conveyed messages to Israeli elements in recent days, in which they wished to encourage the U.S. not to relax its pressure on Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon.

Israel Radio reported that based on International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports that Iran may be conducting underground trials, Bush has accused Iran of secretly planning to acquire nuclear weapons.

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Ha'aretz reported that the Palestinian Mufti, Akrameh Sabri, has issued a religious endorsement of the death sentences imposed on 15 collaborators with Israel. Sabri did not endorse 10 other death sentences. A Maariv headline: "[Abu Mazen] Talks About Peace and Executes." Jerusalem Post reported that the sentences will be carried out this month.

Leading media reported that on Thursday, Sephardic Chief Rabbi Shlomo Amar met with senior Druze officers, promising them that there will never be a Jewish religious ruling making it possible to harm Bedouin and Druze IDF soldiers. Amar denied recent rumors about such a ruling.

Jerusalem Post reported that nearly six years after he fled to Qatar, Issam Abu Issa, chairman and founder of the Palestine International Bank, returned to Ramallah this week to challenge Yasser Arafat's decision to take control of his bank.

Ha'aretz cited documents recently declassified by the state, which show that in November 1954, Egyptian president Abdel Gamal Nasser initiated a peace move with the Israeli government led by Moshe Sharett. In February 1955, David Ben-Gurion returned to his post of defense minister and launched an operation in Gaza, in which 13 IDF soldiers and over 40 Egyptian soldiers were killed. The contacts with Egypt were interrupted.

A Dialog poll supervised by Prof. Camille Fuchs and conducted for Ha'aretz:

- "If a referendum on the disengagement were held, how would you vote?" In favor: 68.5 percent; against: 27.6 percent.

"If the candidates for PM in the next Likud elections are Sharon and Netanyahu, who do you favor?" Sharon: 50 percent; Netanyahu: 29.7 percent.

"If the next elections are held in October 2006, when Sharon is 79, do you think he should run, or retire?" He should retire to his farm: 61.1 percent; he should run again: 33.7 percent; undecided: 5.2 percent.

- "Which Likud candidate is most suitable to succeed Sharon?" Netanyahu: 24.8 percent; Shaul Mofaz: 19.6 percent; Ehud Olmert: 13.3 percent; Shalom: 9.5 percent; Limor Livnat: 2.2 percent.

A Yediot/Mina Zemach (Dahaf Institute) poll:

- "Do you agree with the view that Sharon is the right leader at the right time?" Yes: 61 percent; no: 39 percent.

- "Before the elections, Sharon spoke of 'painful concessions.' Did you understand that he was speaking about evacuating settlements?" Yes: 62 percent; no: 27 percent.

- "If the disengagement [move] succeeds, will Sharon evacuate further settlements?" Yes: 71 percent; no: 19 percent.

- "How will Sharon be remembered in history?" As the father of disengagement: 45 percent; as the man responsible for the Lebanon War: 20 percent; as the man who dismantled the Likud: 11 percent; as the father of the settlements: 10 percent.

- 77 percent of Likud voters favor Sharon as PM; 17 percent prefer Netanyahu.

A Maariv/Teleseker poll:

- "What should Israel do in the light of last week's Tel Aviv bombing?" Not respond, but let the Palestinians continue their fight against terrorism: 64 percent; call off the cease-fire and return to full military operation and targeted killings: 29 percent.

- "Should a referendum be held on disengagement or are the Knesset and government decisions enough?" A referendum is not needed: 53 percent (43 percent four months ago); a referendum is needed: 43 percent (50 percent four months ago).

- Were Knesset elections held today, whom would you vote for?" (Findings given in number of Knesset seats.)

Likud: 40 (currently: 42); Labor Party: 21 (22); Shinui 14 (15); Shas: 9 (11); National Union: 10 (7); Yahad/Meretz: 6 (7); National religious Party: 5 (6); United Torah Judaism: 5 (4); Arab parties: 8 (8).

Lebanese-Syrian Track:

Summary:

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "Despite the risks, Israel should support the move toward democracy in Lebanon, which requires Syrian withdrawal."

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz: "It now appears that Hizbullah could reap the biggest political gain from Hariri's assassination and the clamorous developments in Lebanese politics."

Block Quotes:

I. "An Israeli Dispute on the Syrian Question"

Senior columnist and chief defense commentator Zeev Schiff wrote in independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz (March 4): "The American approach [to the Lebanese question] ... asserts that above all else stands the

desire for democracy in Lebanon, which will require the Syrian army to withdraw from that country. Afterward, the solutions to other problems will follow. In Israel there are two main approaches. One, which originates in the security services, states that first Hizbullah must be disarmed, and that is what will make it possible to impose democracy in Lebanon.... Those who have this opinion ... should be told that the chances of disarming Hizbullah -- which is supported by Iran -- are less than the chances of Israel disarming the settlers.... The second approach originates in the Foreign Ministry, and its main feature is complete support for the UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which mandates Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon. Those adopting this approach rightly say that Israel must not oppose the democratic tendency that is penetrating the Arab world, a tendency that will reinforce Lebanon's independence. The choice is not between the existence of stability in Lebanon and the existence of democracy and independence. The argument that Syria provides stability is groundless. On the contrary: Syria supports Palestinian terrorist organizations headquartered in Damascus ... dispatches terrorists to Iraq, supplies Syrian rockets to Hezbollah, and integrates the terror group into the Syrian army network -- all these, in addition to negative cooperation with Iran, are undermining regional stability. The conclusion is that despite the risks, Israel should support the move toward democracy in Lebanon, which requires Syrian withdrawal."

II. "Hizbullah -- The Big Winner From Hariri's Assassination"

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote in Ha'aretz (March 4): "If it had appeared that the anti-Syrian civilian rebellion in Lebanon would also inundate Hizbullah's headquarters and cause the organization to face a new, harsher reality, current indications point to the contrary.... It now appears that Hizbullah could reap the biggest political gain from Hariri's assassination and the clamorous developments in Lebanese politics. This is because the Lebanese opposition, which succeeded in bringing about the resignation of the pro-Syrian government, now faces a new difficulty: it is unable to compose a government that would garner a majority in parliament with Hizbullah's support or getting those parliament members who still back Syria to join it. For its part, Hizbullah understands that if the opposition somehow manages to form a government, and if the opposition succeeds in getting a large majority in the parliamentary elections, the status of any pro-Syrian body [in Lebanon] would be at risk."

III. "Nasrallah Is Holding the Match"

Military correspondent Alex Fishman wrote in mass-circulation, pluralist Yediot Aharonot (March 4): "At this time, when the Syrians talk about the withdrawal of their forces from Lebanon, they are not talking about a full pullout, but about the implementation of the Taif accord.... The Syrians pretend they do not understand what the world wants from them. They will implement the Taif accord, which allows them, among other things, to continue running the Hizbullah organization.... When the Americans, the French, the Europeans, and the world talk about a Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, they mean the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which requires a total pullout, including that of Syrian intelligence, and the disarming of Hizbullah. At this time, [Syria] refuse to understand, which guarantees the continuation of American and European pressure. The aggressive pressure is what makes the Lebanese opposition tick. It maintains the impetus of Lebanon's flag revolution. President Assad told Time Magazine about a withdrawal of his forces ... in up to six months. The Americans, the Europeans, and the Arab world, too, do not intend to grant him even that amount of time. That earthquake is just beginning."

KURTZER